Siobhan Parkinson

Irish Author candidate for the
2020 Hans Christian Andersen Award
Siobhán Parkinson grew up in various parts of Ireland but has lived all her adult life in Dublin. She studied English and German at Trinity College Dublin in the 1970s and followed her primary degree with a PhD. She has worked in academic publishing, educational publishing, software, an organisation supporting homeless people and various commercial publishing companies as a writer and editor. She was joint editor of *Bookbird* for some years in the early 2000s, and before that was editor of *Inis*, the Children’s Books Ireland magazine. She is also a translator of children’s books, from German, and is and is currently publisher at Little Island Books, a children’s publishing company she founded in 2010.

She is best known as a writer for children (though she has also written novels for adults), and has won numerous awards for her books; several of her titles have been IBBY Honour Books. She writes mostly in English but also occasionally in Irish (Gaelic). Her books have been translated into dozens of languages, including most recently Japanese and Brazilian Portuguese. Her most recent book for children is *Miraculous Miranda*.

She was Ireland’s first Laureate for Children’s Literature (2010-12) and during her term of office she worked to bring Irish children’s literature to the world and books from other cultures to Ireland. She instigated the Laureate Summit, a biennial meeting of children’s laureates and reading ambassadors from around the world at the Bologna Children’s Book Fair.

She visits schools and especially enjoys working with children on their writing.

She lives in Dublin with her husband, who is an artist. They have one son and a baby grandson.
Siobhán Parkinson made her debut as an author with a picturebook for young children entitled All Shining in the Spring. A forthright yet gentle account of the death of a new baby at birth, it signalled what has become a hallmark of Parkinson’s fiction – her ability to handle serious themes with an exquisite lightness of touch and deep respect for the emotional intelligence of young people. She has written over twenty-five books, including historical and contemporary realist fiction, ranging from young adult novels to stories for younger readers. Her work is characterised by social and psychological realism infused with warmth, wit, humanity and a sense of playfulfulness particularly evident in her experimentation with form. Her historical novels (Amelia, No Peace for Amelia and Kate), set in times leading up to and after the foundation of the Irish state, feature strong female protagonists whose personal stories foreground perspectives that were formerly marginalised and contest the notion of any hegemonic narrative of nation. While her work is socially conscious, addressing with nuance and complexity important themes such as youth homelessness (in Breaking the Wishbone), domestic violence and family break-up (in Bruised and The Moon King), the plight of asylum seekers (in The Love Bean), at the centre of all her novels are the rich interior lives of her characters, superbly rendered through her clever use of form. In many of Parkinson’s novels, storying is central to young characters’ growing understanding of themselves and of the world around them. Metafictional techniques (for example, in Bruised and Second Fiddle) and intertextuality (in Four Kids Three Cats Two Cows One Witch (Maybe), Sisters- No Way!, Blue Like Friday and The Love Bean) draw attention to the construction of narrative and the interconnectedness of stories, creating layers of meaning that reward multiple re-readings and require consideration of different perspectives. Parkinson writes in both Irish and English languages and has also translated books from other languages. She has won numerous awards for her work, including the White Raven Award three times (for No Peace for Amelia, Kate and Four Kids Three Cats Two Cows One Witch (Maybe). Something Invisible and The Moon King were selected as IBBY Honour Books. Parkinson served as Ireland’s first Children’s Laureate from 2010 to 2012 and since 2010 has been a publisher of high-quality children’s books with Little Island Publishing. The breadth of genres, variety of form, and range of voices in Parkinson’s fiction, as well as her facility with languages, attest to her versatility as an author of calibre who illuminates life in its many dimensions and stretches boundaries in children’s literature.

Ciara Ni Bhroin
Lecturer in English
Marino Institute of Education
How, at age 13 – or any age – do you explain to well-meaning people that we do not use titles like Miss or Mister ‘because we’re Friends, you see? And how do you reconcile yourself to your own ‘unworthy thoughts’ and try to be a ‘better person’. Add to such familiar experiences the less familiar – a mother arrested campaigning for votes for women, or a close friend whose brother is in prison fighting for the nationalist cause – and you have a sense of the themes and issues explored in two novels by bestselling Irish children’s writer Siobhan Parkinson.

*Amelia*, the first of her two ‘Quaker’ novels, is set in Dublin in 1914 before the outbreak of the first world war. It is authentic both historically and in its links with Quakerism at the time – the characters have genuine Irish Quaker surnames. But it has also been made very accessible for young (probably early teenage) readers. Plot and character are both very strong, and the issues the characters confront arise naturally and convincingly.

For example, the plight of Kelly, a local man locked out of his employment for refusal to sign anti-union papers, leads to a natural, realistic and impassioned dialogue between Amelia and her mother about the relationship between poverty and personal responsibility – a complex and difficult issue likely to reverberate still in the minds of Friends, young and old.

The second of the two novels, *No peace for Amelia*, begins when Amelia is 15 and the first world war is almost two years old.

A brief historical note provides some useful background, to the growth of nationalism in response to Home Rule, the consequent formation of warring private armies such as the Ulster Volunteers and Irish Volunteers, and the latter’s involvement in the Easter Rising.

But against this background the scene is set for a series of events which create some dilemmas in Amelia’s life that are no less relevant today.

In the course of the story Amelia’s boyfriend goes off to fight in the great war, to the shock of his Quaker family, and her best friend’s brother, Patrick, becomes involved in the Easter Rising and seeks refuge with Amelia’s family.

As a consequence of what she has experienced Amelia commits herself to the cause of peace with the assertive conviction typical of a 15-year-old. She declares to Patrick that she’s neither a nationalist nor a unionist but a pacifist, to which he replies:

‘Anti-war?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ah sure, aren’t we all anti-war at heart. I mean, none of us likes fighting and killing.’

‘It’s not enough to be anti-war at heart,’ said Amelia virtuously.

‘What does that mean, now?’ asked Patrick, in a rather patronising tone that Amelia didn’t like.

‘It means,’ she said firmly ‘that you have to work for peace, not just have a distaste for war.’

There can’t be many young Quakers who haven’t, in one form or another, had to address this very issue in recent weeks. The context changes, but the search for an appropriate response goes on.

*Amelia* became a number one bestseller in Ireland, and was shortlisted for the Bisto Book of the Year Award after publication in 1993.

*No peace for Amelia* also received widespread acclaim in Ireland. It is unfortunate therefore that the novels are not better known in this country, a fact that can be attributed to the reluctance of major book sellers to import from Irish publishers.

*Amelia* and *No peace for Amelia* are published by The O’Brien Press, Dublin, and are available from the Friends Bookshop at Friends House, (phone 020 7387 3601).
IRISH writing for children has experienced an undeniable stretching of the limbs in the past 25 years. The provision of a newly robust and resonant literature for an increasingly sophisticated and cosmopolitan young readership has apparently arisen spontaneously from within the cadre of Irish authors; both qualitatively and quantitatively, their response has not been found wanting.

Siobhán Parkinson’s novels, and her occasional, acerbic outbursts in the press, epitomize the alertness and intelligence of current writing for young people in Ireland. Even her earliest books, for younger children, mark out the kind of trajectories that her later novels follow. What Pat Donlon (1995) has described as her ‘ironic and laconic view of life’ is in evidence in the dry wit of The Dublin Adventure (1993) and The Country Adventure (1994); and her commitment to the intellectual capabilities of quite young children is evident in her recent rewriting of both pieces (as Animals Don’t Have Ghosts and Cows are Vegetarians respectively) in the first person.

Her unflinchingly clear-eyed account of the death of a newborn infant is as much a tribute to the emotional capabilities of the very young as it is the epitome of poetic economy.

Similarly, Parkinson’s charge (Power, 2000) that ‘we forget that children are human beings who have the same emotions as adults’ resonates repeatedly through her writing. Her unflinchingly clear-eyed account of the death of a newborn infant is as much a tribute to the emotional capabilities of the very young as it is the epitome of poetic economy. ‘When you are five,’ Parkinson has commented (ibid.), ‘your emotions are even darker…, because you cannot say directly what you are thinking. You don’t have the words yet.’

The crux delivered in the very title of this book, All Shining in the Spring: The Story of a Baby who Died, demonstrates in little the rhetorical tension (between taut, economical evocation and uncompromising direct statement) that underpins this extraordinary portrait of a grieving family. The short sentences and simple statements throw into relief the deeply moving moments of direct speech (‘He’s only a baby,’ said Matthew sadly to his mother. ‘He didn’t even have a chance to see you’”) that brilliantly articulate the complexity of feeling beneath the surface of the prose. The book’s taut style renders perfectly the tensions between the turmoil of inarticulate grief and the simple truths both adults and children are forced to use to clothe it.

In the early companion novels Amelia and No Peace for Amelia, Parkinson creates a double diptych. The broad movement from the first to the second is from innocence to experience, while the compared and contrasted world views of the two central protagonists check and balance each other continually across both novels. Amelia, initially the complacent, middle-class, much-loved daughter of a highly successful merchant father and a politically progressive (if somewhat dotty) mother, is in stark opposition to sharp-featured, sharp-tongued, sharp-witted Mary-Arnie, the no-nonsense maid-of-all-work.
The collapse of Amelia’s father’s business forces a reassessment of hitherto unquestioned beliefs. Uncompromisingly, Parkinson confronts Amelia, and the reader, with new angles on quotidian commonplace: is it wrong to take leftovers from a well-fed family to feed one that’s starving? Do the well-off have the right to a large family, and the impoverished a moral duty to contain themselves? If strongly held political beliefs land a person in gaol, is it proper, or even possible, to discriminate morally between the individuals concerned on the grounds of one’s own particular point of view? Running beneath these issues, apparently spontaneously generated by the day-to-day narrative of Amelia, so feat is its interweaving of the mundane with the momentous, is Parkinson’s notion of innate comprehension fettered by incomplete articulation.

Parkinson never allows History to dominate this history of Amelia, because that is not how we perceive life at the moment we are living it. She never allows the novels to become a vehicle for overt didacticism of any kind. The protagonists learn what they learn and observe what they observe in that fragmented way that real people do, and very often they cannot articulate what they learn.

The structural notion of the double-take reaches its apogee in the award-winning Sisters ... No Way! which consists of two first-person accounts of the same story. The novel has two front covers, designed so that the reader has no clue which account to read first, or to which to give precedence. The contrasting idiocies, Ashling’s maternally mundane and materialistic, Cindy’s laced with literary reference and unapologetic arrogance, each irritate the reader with splendid impartiality. The deficits of character revealed by each narrator’s account are checked and balanced by the alternative point of view.

But again, this novel is more than the sum of two parts. The names of Cindy and Ashling, the acquisition of a step-parent by each protagonist, and the handsome young stranger bringing a lost shoe to the home of the fleet-at-midnight object of his desire all invite the reader to think again and think harder. Barely credible at times, tedious Ashling and over-studied, self-dramatising Cindy teeter on the brink of caricature. Life is not a fairy tale, but, if Doc Martens can be allowed to replace glass slippers (and bunny slippers to replace Doc Martens), then the reader will learn to discriminate between intelligent reading and over-reading. Less ostensibly, the overhasty marriage hard on the heels of Cindy’s mother’s death, the funeral baked meats coldly furnishing forth the wedding tables and driving Cindy into black-clad self-contemplation, the perverse redemptive aunt, all suggest (to this reader anyway) that Parkinson has more than one prince in mind. We might
think that we construct our own narratives, our own accounts of our own lives, Parkinson seems to be saying, but there is always someone else writing their version of us, and, furthermore, there is no escaping what Harold Bloom has called the ‘anxiety of influence’, the fact that there is no narrative new under the sun, that if we do write a narrative of self, it will inevitably be read in terms of narratives that already exist.

But the shift in register required to understand the function of the structure of this novel aligns the ideas more closely with adult writing like Jeanette Winterson’s (‘Listen. I’m telling you stories’) or Allende’s short stories. The real cleverness of this novel subsists in the risks Parkinson takes, for example making some of the most revealing moments the funniest – as when Dympna draws attention to the functionalism of naming. Dympna says that her cow is called Dympna; Beverly says ‘Really? Isn’t that confusing?’ and Dympna replies, ‘No, I don’t think so. I call her Dympna. She doesn’t call me anything.’

Of those to whom much is given, much is required, and Parkinson’s next novel pushes the parameters of literary type back further still. Considered by many to be her best novel, Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (mayhe) is witty in all its aspects, simultaneously parodying and pushing forward the time-honoured genre of the adventure story. Replete with Blytomesque picnic (lost, on this occasion), snobbery (here regretted, eventually, and overcome) and obligatory odd adult to replace absent parents, the novel transcends its form by a deft interweaving of the protagonists’ own rewriting of self by their own telling of stories. The peculiar Irishness of island writing too is invoked here: the intricacies of Eilis Dillon’s masterly exploration of insularity in all its forms in The Island of Ghosts are recalled, and the realignment of fantasy and reality at the moment of the thunderstorm strongly recalls Patricia Lynch at her best in the later chapters of The Turf-Cutter’s Donkey.

Boundaries are continually called into question: those between fantasy and reality, between fact and fiction, between madness and sanity, between articulation and communication. It’s rather sad, though, that a passage towards the end of the novel articulates this so explicitly, because the patterning of the novel provides the answers to the conundrum for the alert reader, and it’s one of the few moments in any of her novels that Parkinson giftwraps a submerged truth.

In The Moon King, my own favourite, Parkinson revisits the notion of inarticulateness and the understated, powerful simplicity of All Shining in the Spring re-emerges in a newly robust form. Young Ricky’s abused, damaged personality, which manifests itself psychologically by traumatised silence, is rendered brilliantly by a fragmented interior monologue, usually preceded by a slightly fuller account from a third-person narrative that is already shifting towards Ricky’s own idiolect. This treatment of speech imitates a general motif in the novel, that of degrees of anxiety. The foster family Parkinson creates is not a perfect safe world, and other characters are troubled too. It is never quite clear which children are fostered, and which are birth-family.

Ricky’s trauma is placed in the context of degrees of trauma, his erratic behaviour one particular form of several forms. The shifting in and out of register to produce Ricky’s voice is a particular form of this nuancing, and it brings the preoccupation home powerfully. Ricky’s inarticulacy can be described by the narrator/grasped by the reader if it’s described in regular language; the narrator can represent it partly through a shift to narrated stream-of-consciousness; but the isolation his damaged world-view imposes on him can be felt only by letting him speak internally to himself, in still more fragmented speech, in a typeface that alienates it from the rest of the text.

Breaking the Wishbone demonstrates a similarly accurate ear for idiolect. Parkinson’s experiment in direct speech with an extreme sparseness of detail is a departure from her usually vivid description, but the voices bring the characters and their surroundings starkly to life. Most poignant here are the occasional flashes of humour, the juxtapositions of despair and desperate attempts at some kind of normality, of ‘gaiety transfiguring all that dread’. In repatterning
her writing to her purpose, Parkinson takes the risk of freeing the characters from being reported; yet again, it is in telling their own stories that they are able to take control, to a limited degree, of their own futures.

"Breathtakingly elegant narrative stream"

Call of the Whales is the closest Parkinson has yet come to a crossover book; the marvellous sense of nostalgia, the evocation of what she has elsewhere (Parkinson, 1999) called ‘forgotten, joyous corners of the imagination’, dominates the yearning to reconnect with the narrator’s own past and sense of wonder. The circularity of experience is caught fleetingly with an Eliotesque recapitulation at the end of the novel. Again, the notions of coming of age in an alien place, the necessity of understanding and accepting alternative points of view, the simultaneous pull towards home and towards a new and independent self, form an unobtrusive undercurrent to the breathtakingly elegant narrative stream. The form here is a traditional one, but Parkinson’s prose is at its most lyrical, her examination of relationships at its most understated. With this novel, the traumas of adolescence are a matter for reflection, not for immediate experience, and the settled nature of the form in which she writes here underscores the notion of recollection in tranquillity.

In The Love Bean, Parkinson’s most recent work, previous ideas of doubling, of intertextuality, of time present being bound up in time past, are revisited. Irishness at its most ancient and at its most present is shown to have the same personal and universal preoccupations: individuality, insularity, tensions between generations and social groups and between expectation and resignation. The dialogue between the young people and between the generations is perfectly observed, and the reverberations between the two stories carefully crafted. There is a sense here, not just of stories informing each other, but of the very narrative of history informing and reforming itself.

Parkinson stoically resists writing a novel where history dominates individuality. In allowing the daily confrontations with self and other to dominate both stories, in allowing self-conscious accounts of the formation of self through reading to creep in, she draws attention again and again to the question of what makes us who we are, their cleverness to subordinate their proper function – that illumination of real life so that we see it all at once strange and new, and yet with a shock of recognition.

"The body of her work shows a highly intelligent facility with form and an uncompromising attention to the detail of her prose"

References
Siobhán Parkinson discusses the recent creation of Little Island, a new imprint of New Island Books, dedicated to publishing translations of quality children's literature.

Little Island is a new imprint of New Island Books, and we plan to publish our first batch of books for children and young teenagers in the spring of 2010. Intensely fond as I am of Boston, I am also rather partial to Berlin. But our children are hardly aware that Berlin even exists, much less that it might have something to offer them – and this bothers me. back in its bottle now, for sure, I said to myself, making a tentative phone call to New Island to see if they were still interested. Interested? they said. Of course we are interested. And where are those translated books of yours? Clunk! I went again, right out on the floor. This time I had the good sense to hang onto the telephone receiver, though. Ahem, I said, from my supine position. Well, I said. Mm, I said. Or at least in their heads.

Our plan for now is to publish in three main areas: books in translation, new books by new and old(ish) Irish authors, and some

Planned list for spring 2010 (subject to change):

- Old Friends: The Lost Tales of Fionn Mac Cumhail by Tom O'Neill (right)
- The Cryptid Files: Loch Ness by Jean Fillacraft
- Rabbit Giants by Burkhard Spinnen (translated by Siobhain Parkinson)
- Over the Wall by Renate Ahrens (far right) (translated by Siobhann Parkinson)
- The Lantern Moon by Maeve Friel (reprint)
- Jimmy, Jimmy by Mark O'Sullivan (a long-awaited new title from the acclaimed writer)

That is how I came to approach New Island with the idea that children need translated books, so that they can get some sense of how life is lived in non-English-speaking countries. Quite right, they said. We've been thinking that ourselves. (Well, that wasn't exactly what they said, but it's close enough for this story.) When I picked myself up off the floor, I muttered a few names and titles and then I ran away jabbering in fear at the genie I had unleashed.

And then came the R-word. (You know, it's on the radio. It means people can't afford their TV licences.) Oh, well, that genie can go

But of course, New Island said, waving merrily as it went sailing by, if we are going to do children's books in translation, we may as well do children's books altogether, don't you think? After all, it's good to offer children books by Irish authors too, isn't it? Being already stretched out on the floor, I couldn't do my clunk bit again, so this time I sat up and waved back. Of course, I said. What a brilliant idea! Ahoy!

And then I began to cast about looking for books, and behold, they came pouring out of the bilges, oodles of them. It seems everyone I met had a children's book in their bulkhead locker.

reprints of good books by Irish writers that have somehow slipped out of print, and our list for the spring will probably consist of a mixture of titles in those categories. For the moment, we are concentrating on quality fiction for pre-teens (9-12) and early to mid-seens (13-16), but that's more a preference than a policy decision. We are committed to quality, but open-minded on just about everything else, so anyone with a really great idea for a book is welcome to come aboard and talk to us. (By us, I mean me: sparkbenn@gmail.com.)

Siobhán Parkinson is an award-winning author.
PARKINSON, Siobhán


Publications for Children

*Off We Go ... The Dublin Adventure.* Dublin, O’Brien, 1992.
*Off We Go ... The Country Adventure.* Dublin, O’Brien, 1992.

Publications for Young Adults


Other


Siobhán Parkinson comments:

As a child I wanted to be a writer “when I grew up.” Being a child I wanted to write for children, naturally enough. My parents thought this an amusing little idea. Then I did grow up (well, sort of), and by now, I rather agreed with my parents that wanting to be an author was an amusing little idea. To tell the truth, the feeling that I mightn’t be all that good at it was really what kept me for so long from embarking on a literary career, together with a horror of all the competition out there and of the exposing of one’s inner self that writing involves. I suppose I needed to do a lot more growing up before I was ready to take that plunge.

It’s an old cliche, isn’t it, that people come to writing for children when they have children themselves. When my son was born, even when he started to take an interest in books, when I started to read to him, when he started to read back ... none of these things moved me to want to be a children’s writer. It never crossed my mind. But then something happened in our family, and I desperately needed a book to help my son (then five years old) to understand what was going on, but no such book existed. That’s when I wrote my first children’s book.

What happened was that I discovered, late in my second pregnancy, that the child I was carrying was not going to survive birth. My small son had followed the progress of the pregnancy eagerly and was very excited about this big event in our lives. So how to break this dreadfully disappointing, even disturbing news to him? Being a literary sort of person, my first instinct was to reach for a book, but the books I found, although I was able to bend them to my purpose, were quite unsuitable for our unusual (but not unique) situation. I found the available books on death for children were sentimental and rather poorly produced, and none of the ones I could find at any rate dealt with such a taboo idea as baby-death. In the end, I wrote the book I was looking for myself.

The publisher I sent it to did eventually publish it several years later (as *All Shining in the Spring*), but in the meantime they called me in and announced that they thought I was a children’s writer, and asked me when I could produce my next manuscript. I laughed. Amusing little idea, I thought. That was how I came to be a children’s writer. When I am feeling particularly spiritual (which is only occasionally), I like to think that little Daniel brought gifts with him, though he didn’t stay long, and one of those gifts was my becoming a children’s writer, because if it hadn’t been for him, I don’t think I would ever have dreamed of doing such a thing.

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Although her first book was for young children and was followed by several other successful books for the under tens, it is Parkinson’s writings for young adults which have brought her recognition and success. This writer’s sense of irony and laconic view of life is obvious even in her early work such as *The Leprechaun Who Wished He Wasn’t*. For most Irish people leprechauns belong in the folklore of past times or as tacit souvenirs to be sold to gullible tourists. From the first sentences of the book you know that this is a gentle send-up of another icon: “Laurence was fed up with being a leprechaun. He was tired of sitting under a boring old rainbow, guarding a mouldy old crock of gold and making endless shoes. He wanted to be a human being.”

Parkinson’s skill at telling a good story in clear, sometimes funny, almost always compelling prose is evident in most of her books. In a mere sixty pages of text and images in *All Shining in the Spring* she tells poignantly and honestly of the devastation and lack of comprehension of a young boy at the untimely death of his baby brother. In a narrative that is neither harrowing nor maudlin she simply states the reality. With one of the loveliest book titles ever, we know that Matthew will recall each year his short-lived baby brother as he and his parents visit the flower-studded grave “all shining in the spring.”

In the late 1980s and 1990s in Ireland there has been a dramatic change in both the number and quality of books published for children and young adults. Irish people have a great interest in and obsession with history, so it is not surprising that in their
writings, many of the best contemporary authors eventually are
given to this genre. Parkinson too has given us some interesting
work in this area with *Amelia* and *No Peace for Amelia*. She draws
an accurate and compelling picture of Dublin in the 1914-16 pe-
period without bogging the reader down in historical detail. When
we meet her, Amelia, the daughter of a well-to-do Quaker family,
is preparing to celebrate her fourteenth birthday. Against this back-
ground is played out the social tensions of a changing society, the
rumours of an impending insurrection, and the threat of War in
Europe. At its simplest this is a riches-to-rags story of the de-
clining fortunes of the Pim family, and the reactions of all in-
volved. All is changing for the bewildered Amelia as she is de-
serted by her former classmates and friends, but befriended by
the young servant girl Mary Ann. Parkinson is at her best when
describing apparently mundane happenings. When Amelia first
tries to use that new-fangled invention the telephone the scene in
the General Post Office is so written that the reader too suffers
the embarrassment of snooty officials, the terror of new technol-
ogy, the overriding fear of looking foolish.

In the sequel *No Peace for Amelia* we have moved on a little in
time—and whilst the family fortunes have not exactly been re-
stored, through diligence and hard work Amelia’s father has re-
gained a small foothold on the social ladder. Amelia falls in
love and is forced to reconcile her love for the soldier Frederick with
the Quaker abhorrence of violence. The divided world of early
twentieth-century Ireland is epitomised neatly in the anxieties of
the two young women: Amelia, with her young man going to fight
for King and country, and Mary Ann, the servant girl, with her
brother fighting a very different fight for the cause of Irish
freedom. The uneasy alliance and understanding serves as a micro-
cosm of the wider historical and social realities.

Parkinson’s young people are refreshingly normal and rela-
tively angst free. *Sisters ... No Way!* is a cleverly conceived
flip-over book. Two diaries of two very different young women
thrown together by the marriage of their parents, one separated,
one recently-widowed, are printed back-to-back. The reader is
immediately confronted with the dilemma of which diary to read
first and in that choice inevitably becomes embroiled in that
sister’s particular perspective of the world. This is a clever,
thought-provoking book which uses the interplay of the two
narratives to counterpoint different life styles. Readers must
constantly reassess as they finally come to the recognition that
there is no one truth, no one reality, only life as viewed through
different eyes. Parkinson has an acute ear for the euphemisms
society adopts to hide embarrassment, as when Aishling, the
more conservative of the “sisters”, rails against her father be-
cause he introduces his daughters to newcomers as “My daugh-
ters, from before, you know.” It is Cindy, the outwardly punk,
rebellious daughter who comes the closest to the reality of her
situation as she means confidingly to her diary about her new
family: “Not that they’re mean or horrible or anything—just
plain boring and weird and silly and ‘oh, just not like us. Of
course we’re weird too, everyone is, but I think our weird-
ness is more creative.”

In an author’s note at the beginning of *Four Kids, Three Cats, 
Two Cows, One Witch (Maybe)—ostensibly a summer holiday ad-
venture trip to an island—Parkinson gives us a clue to the under-
lying symbolism of the journey: “In some cultures young people
who are approaching adulthood have to undergo some sort of test
or ordeal... They might have to go off by themselves into the
forest, for example, and survive on their own initiative. In other
cultures the transition is marked by the older people telling the
children the secret stories of their tribe. Once they have these sto-
ries, they are no longer children, but grown-up members of the
tribe. But no matter what form these ceremonies and rituals take
(and in some cultures they are pretty nasty) every child has to
make the journey from childhood to young adulthood for himself
or herself.”

Snobby Beverly, extremely self-contained (at least on the sur-
face), constantly looking down her nose at the local youth Kevin
from her sophisticated stance, has her rite of passage when on a
cliff edge she suffers an attack of vertigo. In a stunning *tour de
force* Parkinson details the panic and fright she suffers and her
resigned acceptance of help and ultimately friendship from the
heretofore despised Kevin. The catalyst in the story, as is so many
young adult novels, is an outsider, an older person—the eccentric
and possibly insane Dymphna, rumoured by the mainlanders to
be a witch. Her presence haunts the entire book, at first only
through the knowledge of the local boy Kevin, but later as a pres-
ence felt by all of the four protagonists. Yet the story is well-
advanced before we actually get to meet Dymphna as she comes
home to her ramshackle cottage to find the four sheltering there
from the impending storm. Intertwoven throughout the book are
the tales told by the young people under the spell of Lady Island,
tales that are allegorical, sometimes surprising even the tellers
themselves by their unexpected twists and always with the ghost
presence of the strange listener. This is Parkinson’s most complex
and sophisticated book to date and is a story which can be enjoyed
at many levels.

—Pat Donlon

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**PARRISH, Anne**

**Nationality:** American. **Born:** Colorado Springs, Colorado, 12
November 1888. **Education:** Misses Ferris’s School and San
Luis School, Colorado Springs; Misses Hebb’s School, Claymont,
Delaware; Philadelphia School of Design. **Family:** Married 1) Charles Albert Corliss in 1915 (died 1936); 2) Josiah
Titzell in 1938 (died 1943). **Awards:** Harper prize, 1925. **Died:**
5 September 1957.

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**PUBLICATIONS FOR CHILDREN**

**Fiction**

*Knee-High to a Grasshopper*, with Dillwyn Parrish, illustrated
by the authors. New York, Macmillan, 1923.  
*The Dream Coach*, with Dillwyn Parrish, illustrated by the au-
*The Story of Appleby Caple*, illustrated by the author. New York,

**Poetry**

*Falling Island*, illustrated by the New York, Harper, and
London, Benn, 1930.
Robert Dunbar on five remarkable recent Irish children’s books

Towards the end of Siobhán Parkinson’s Amelia (O’Brien: £3.99: 0862735326) there is a sentence which encapsulates the principal theme of this engrossing narrative: “Changed circumstances,” we read, “had changed her view of what mattered.” As implied here, the emphasis is on the changing fortunes of 13-year-old Amelia Pim, daughter of a Quaker household in the Rathgar (Dublin) of 1914 and, in particular, on her gradual awareness of the trivality of birthday parties, fine clothes and elegant living once the winds of reality begin to blow on the doors of Kenilworth Square. Parkinson’s greatest achievement — other than her ability to create credible characters and to tell a well-paced story — is to provide, as backbone, a portrait of an era in Irish social life when all former certainties are under threat. There is talk of an armed rebellion, women are demanding votes, personal prosperity gives way to bankruptcy, the hierarchy of master, mistress and servant becomes destabilized: Amelia’s grandmother, dismissing the once magnificent, but now decaying, orangery as ‘vainglory’ can see beyond a mere architectural detail. The dreams and longings of childhood egoism have to give way to a sterner scheme of things, an understanding with which Parkinson totally convincingly endows her young heroine.

In Jane Mitchell’s striking novel When Stars Stop Spinning (Poolbeg: £3.99: 1853713201), the ‘stars’ of the title first appear as dizzyingly glamorous symbols of the excitement which 15-year-old Tony and his schoolmates are certain lies ahead of them as they nonchalantly sprawl on the grass of Stephen’s Green; the sterner reality here comes in the form of the consequences of a joyriding escapade and the removal of Tony to a rehabilitation centre. It is a reversal which will dramatically alter Tony and his perspective on the worlds of school, home, himself, since his period of and a developing relationship with another young centre resident: this is Stephen, also fifteen, also interested in music, but with a life expectancy which will allow of only the briefest fulfilment. Mitchell sketches in the backgrounds of family, school and hospital with sympathetic skill, but the real interest (and the source of the book’s power) lies in her portrayal of the intensity of feeling between the two boys. Few teenage novels offer anything like the emotional directness of their first meeting — ‘Slowly, not wanting to frighten, Stephen lifted his arm with great effort and leaned it on the bedspread beside Tony’s hand’ — or the controlled grief of their last.

The first and last encounters of the two heroes of Cormac Mac Raoin’s It’s Pinbindimomill! (Wolfhound: £3.99: 0863274080) are equally arresting moments, albeit in a story where the prevailing tone is light-hearted, spiced with some excellent jokes. On the eve of his eleventh birthday, Jim Doran finds himself visited by the 13 centimetre tall (and 121-year-old) mankin of the book’s title: the seven days they are to spend together will see chaos at home and at school and end in a sharply observed press conference (there is even room for a RTE special correspondent called Stewart Crowe) which in turn ends in a roaring fracas. Beneath the fun and apparently endless inventiveness, however, there is a view of a child’s world which, while refreshingly child-centred, is never coy or sentimental. In line with Parkinson’s Amelia and Mitchell’s Tony, Mac Raoin’s Jim witnesses to the transforming and growth-inducing potential of experience. Pin, he and his twin sister agree as the book closes, ‘had certainly changed things for the better’, though when earlier this same sister had announced her acceptance of Pin’s existence the same Jim ‘felt a deep sinking feeling, a sadness as if something precious had been lost.’

and discovery lies also at the heart of Pat Hynes’s Land of Deep Shadow (Wolfhound: £3.99: 0863273440), though here the details of the narrative are worked out in the animal, rather than the human, world. Very early in the story, its hero, Packo the hare, is told by his mentor Marsha: ‘You’ll find yourself by losing yourself’ and it is the tragic fulfilling of this prophecy with which events are to be concerned. The motif of the quest provides the structural underpinning of the novel and allows for a succession of highly charged and vividly described confrontations: ‘to confront the unknown is to confront the ultimate terror’, as a quotation from the shadowy hare epic known as ‘The Prophecy of Tuarog’ reminds us some way before the forces of dark and light engage on the final battlefield. Although the ‘animal story’ is a well established genre in children’s literature, it rarely manages to combine quite as credibly as it does here the dual role of natural history narrative and allegorical parable: the hares’ battle for survival becomes a clear emblem of our own struggle for — and search for meaning in — existence.

Notions of ‘struggle’ and ‘survival’ are central once again in Siobhán Parkinson’s The Chieftain’s Daughter (O’Brien: £3.99: 0862783380), one of the most powerful examples of Irish children’s historical fiction to have appeared so far. It is difficult to decide what the greatest merit of the story is. We can choose from its subtly conveyed sense of time and place (the Ireland of fifteen centuries ago), its cast of fearlessly vivid characters (particularly the interplay of young and old), its deceptive simplicity of language (cloaking a narrative technique which, in teasingly moving from past to present, from first person to third, enforces the reader’s continuous adjustment of perspective). Above all, perhaps, we can surrender to the almost mythic dimensions of the novel’s themes: friendship and enmity, passion and hatred, trust and betrayal, all reconstructed in the tale which Dinn Keene, the ancient chief whom we meet on the book’s opening page, relates not just for our benefit, but for the newly-arrived ‘Patrick of the Pens, the great Man of Speech.’ At the heart of his story — and we mean both Dinn’s and McBratney’s — lies an evocation of young love kindled and young love killed, a tragedy numbing in its unfolding: like the young Dinn mourning his lovely Frann we end by hearing ‘only the soughing wind in the evening.”
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<td>The Leprechaun Who Wished He Wasn't</td>
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<td>No Peace for Amelia</td>
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<td>Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (Maybe)</td>
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<td>Dialann Sár-Rúnda Amy Ní Chonchūir</td>
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<td>Miraculous Miranda</td>
<td>2016</td>
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<td>Rocking the System</td>
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Ten most important titles

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